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THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPIRITUAL BEING OF THE UNIVERSE. *)

Lecture by Dr. Rudolf Steiner delivered at THE HAGUE on the
3rd of November 1922.

Last Tuesday I tried to explain to you in what way we can gain knowledge of man's spiritual being, of that part in him which endures eternally and which lies beyond birth and death. To-day I would like to speak to you of the same subject, by throwing light upon it from another side; I would like to explain to you that it is indeed possible to gain knowledge of the spiritual being of the universe.

It is not possible, however, to gain such knowledge along the path which is now recognised as the scientific path. The natural-scientific methods of research which have reaped such great triumphs in the last centuries, triumphs which can be fully acknowledged from our present standpoint, the scientific world-conception builds up its knowledge upon observations and experiments, that is to say upon that which we learn to know about the world through our senses. Of course, our thoughts try to elaborate what our senses reveal to us about the world, and we thus discover laws of Nature, the contents of which are, in a certain way, spiritual contents, for the laws of Nature which we ascertain through thinking unquestionably contain something spiritual. Yet the thoughts which we thus gain and which go beyond the limits of observation and experiment, do not have an independent content; they merely give us pictures of what the senses gather from the external world, be they naked or equipped with instruments. That means that the soul-spiritual in man spreads over that which he can gather along the path of ordinary sense-perception, or even along the path of a methodically trained sense-perception.

Everything concerning man which may be learned in this way is only the effect produced by the external world upon his bodily

*) From stenographic notes unrevised by the lecturer.

organisation. And the accompanying feelings in the soul are nothing but an experience of the sensory-physical world.

Yet we cannot stop at this mere accompanying experience of the sensory-physical world, for there is above all in the physical world no place for an undying impulse which lives in the human soul, namely, man's inner religious-moral experiences. The modern scientific world-conception reaches perfection through the very fact that it observes objects and processes in the world without mixing anything moral or religious coming from man's inner being with this observation of the laws of the universe.

Thus we face a world to which we ascribe real existence, though it does not contain the most valuable element of all, the element through which we attain our true dignity, our real value as human beings in the world: the moral, the religious element. That is why in every epoch men have tried to rise beyond mere sense-experience, beyond the experience of a merely physical world, towards a knowledge of the spiritual being of the universe.

But the modern era, in which we are now living and in which civilisation has reached a certain greatness through a strictly scientific way of thinking, has either completely denied the possibility of attaining a supersensible or spiritual knowledge, or at least great doubts have been expressed concerning the possibility of attaining such a knowledge. To-day, however, we have reached a turning point (I have indicated this in my last lecture) through which we must seek just as great a certainty in regard to the knowledge of spiritual life, as the certainty given to us by natural science. And just because of this certainty which we owe to natural science, we must seek an equal degree of certainty in regard to our knowledge of spiritual life, of that life which contains, in addition to the natural-physical processes, the moral processes and man's religious connection with the supersensible world.

Now if we wish to understand the path leading into the supersensible worlds and to a knowledge of the spiritual being of the universe, it will be advisable to follow a path similar to that which we trod on the 31st of October, when I spoke to you of the knowledge of man's spiritual being. In my last lecture I explained how in ancient times of human evolution men tried to find that path leading to a spiritual knowledge of the human being. I described it to you in order to show you that the older path was a more material one and that to-day a more spiritual path must be sought, proceeding from a natural-scientific foundation. Consequently I shall first describe to you the way in which men used to strive in remoter times of human evolution, if they wished to rise beyond the perception of the physical-sensory world to a knowledge of the spiritual being of the universe. On this subject too I wish to avoid misunderstandings, for I do not in any way recommend this path of olden times. To-day we can no longer tread it, but in order to indicate the one which should be trodden to-day, a connection can be found with the more external

contemplative path of older times.

On this older path, leading us back to the spiritual contemplation in the Orient during primeval epochs of human evolution, it was taken for granted that those who wished to follow it, turned to someone who had already trodden that path, to a teacher of spiritual knowledge. In this ancient oriental civilisation it was necessary to seek a Guru, a teacher of spiritual knowledge, if one wished to ascend to the knowledge of the spiritual being of the universe. You might of course ask where these first teachers of spiritual knowledge reached their conception in those ancient times. Let us first bear in mind the idea which then existed concerning the earliest, primeval teachers of humanity. Men believed that these teachers had obtained their ideas directly from divine instructors, with whom they had been supersensibly connected in the primeval beginnings of the earth's history.

I can only allude to this belief of olden times, for to-day a discussion of this question would lead us too far from our subject. I am merely drawing your attention to the fact that this question leads us, for instance, into the same spheres as the question concerning the origin of human speech or of human thought. To explain how supersensible teachings could be transmitted to others, refuge was sought, in these past ages, in a supersensible element, and in the same way the origin of speech was sought in the fact that divine influences asserted themselves in the human beings and in humanity, so that speech had, as it were, been transmitted directly from the supersensible world.

Thus people believed that these first teachers, the first Gurus, had received their knowledge because they were supersensibly related with the first great instructors of humanity. The men of later times also knew that they could only reach a true contemplation of the spiritual world, a true knowledge of the spiritual essence of the universe, if they turned to such a Guru, such a teacher.

What did such a teacher do? The first condition of his being able to work at all with his pupils was that in those ancient times men went in search of a teacher of humanity with an almost unbounded degree of confidence. His pupils felt towards him a confidence which modern men can hardly imagine, for they think and feel differently in this connection. The splendour surrounding the personalities of those teachers was due to the fact that people believed that in their mystery-centres, as we call them to-day, and which were at the same time religious, artistic and scientific centres (for religion, art and science were then one), the Gurus maintained a direct connection with the supersensible world. Men looked up to them in such a way that they did not only take for granted that they would learn something theoretical, which the teachers themselves had investigated through some natural experiment, but they took for granted that what these teachers uttered, the signs which they made and what they did before the pupils were the immediate

external manifestation of a divine essence lying behind them.

The pupils therefore did not face their teachers in a one-sided intellectual way, they did not only confront them with their one-sided head-development, but in view of the above-mentioned attitude they faced them with their whole being. They felt that their intellect was being illuminated, but not in a theoretical, intellectual manner, for everything which their intellect thus received as an illumination was at the same time felt as if it were permeated by a warm, feeling element, by the power of a will proceeding from the very depths of the things existing in the world, and penetrating into the will of men. The pupils surrendered their whole being, when they thus turned to the leaders of such mystery-centres.

The teaching which was imparted there was not theoretical in the modern meaning, but it was connected with feelings which permeated every detail. It was connected with the fact that the pupil perceived in the teacher how in every word he spoke, in every movement of his hand and in everything he unfolded before the pupil in the form of experiments filled with the spirit, the divine-spiritual will itself flowed into earthly life.

What was the result of this? The result was that the soul-spiritual being of the pupil was actually able to separate itself from the physical and even from the finer etheric organism, which leads a fleeting existence in the physical organism. The pupil could thus perceive one thing: Before he had had such teaching, he said to himself: Perhaps my whole soul-life ceases when I fall asleep at night; when I am asleep I am perhaps only a physical body, with activities differing from those of my waking condition; perhaps when this physical organism has for a time surrendered to purely organic activities during sleep, it is able to develop again a conscious soul-spiritual life, just as the candle brings forth a flame when it is lit. Before his spiritual training the pupil might have said to himself: That which flares up from the body's physical functions, the soul-spiritual life which is my own concern from the moment of waking up to the moment of falling asleep, is perhaps a mere illusion.

The Guru's teachings enabled him to give up saying such things, for he perceived that in the evening when he fell asleep, his soul-spiritual being actually left the physical and the finer etheric organism as a real essence emancipated from the body.

He perceived that from the moment of falling asleep to the moment of waking up he lived in a purely soul-spiritual body in a soul-spiritual world, just as during the day he lived among physical objects with his physical organisation. The soul-spiritual organism in which he lived during sleep was outside his physical body, but it lived into it again in the morning when he awoke. The instructor, which he received as a pupil enabled him to say: When I fall asleep in ordinary life, the soul-spiritual being which exists in addition to the physical organism which remains behind in the physical-sensory world, lives and works in the soul-spiritual world, but

is inwardly so weak that it cannot grow conscious of what it experiences in the soul-spiritual world. Through the forces which went out of the Guru, that part which from the moment of waking up to the moment of falling asleep lived outside the body in an unconscious condition, was now transferred to another kind of existence outside the body.

This other kind of existence outside the body, could at first be produced only under the Guru's influence, until the pupil gradually advanced to the stage of producing it himself. In this new form of existence, which was no sleep, but opposed to it, though it resembled sleep in that the soul-spiritual part was outside the body, forces were awakened in a soul-spiritual way within this soul-spiritual part. These forces always exist, but in the ordinary waking life they are transmitted only through the blood and through the nerves.

Through the awakening of this new force, the soul-spiritual part was animated without the aid of the physical body, and lived in a condition opposed to and yet resembling sleep, because man existed outside his physical body. This soul-spiritual part was animated from within. Even as in waking life the physical organism transmits the sense-impressions, so this inwardly strengthened soul-spiritual organism now gave the Guru's pupil impressions derived from a soul-spiritual environment.

We may therefore say: The Guru succeeded in severing the pupil's soul-spiritual part from his physical body not only in the natural way in which this takes place whenever we fall asleep, but through the teachings he received, and above all through the influence based on confidence, on active confidence, he made the soul-spiritual part go out of the body in such a way that it was strengthened from within, filled with consciousness, so that it experienced wakefully that the whole external world which can otherwise be perceived only through the senses and which appears as a sensory physiognomy with laws comprising the details of this sensory physiognomy, that this whole environment appeared as a spiritual world.

As stated, the condition for this was not only a theoretical relationship, the relationship which ordinarily exists between a pupil and a teacher, but it was a moral relationship; as described to you. The Guru was a man who was morally sanctified and the pupil of such a Guru had a religious connection not only with the mysterious supersensible powers of the universe, but above all he had a religious connection with his Guru, the mediator through whom he came in contact with the divine-spiritual Beings.

The human being of ancient times thus reached the possibility of looking into the spiritual being of the universe and he reached this not in a merely theoretical manner, but by developing his whole being.

But you see, what was required as a first condition in

order to look into the spiritual essence of the world, was that the soul-spiritual organisation had to go out of the physical organism, thus enabling man to develop a conscious life outside his body.

The way in which this was done by the pupil in the old oriental culture, made him of course dependent on his teacher, his Guru, and this would be unbearable to-day. Yet everything which exists to-day traditionally in the form of religious ideas, even in the form of moral impulses, is not the outcome of that which natural science has taught us in the course of the last centuries, but has been maintained traditionally from those ancient times, in which men strove to establish a connection with the spiritual being of the universe in the manner described.

Then came other times in the evolution of humanity. These are characterised by the fact that the possibility of one man influencing another in the way in which the Guru of ancient times influenced his pupils, ceased. Had this possibility continued, that which to-day above all gives man his dignity and true value in his earthly life would never have entered human evolution: the full ego-consciousness would never have entered humanity, nor the consciousness of human freedom.

This ego-consciousness did not exist in those ancient times, when people strove after learning - if this modern word can be applied to their strivings. In the face of external Nature man felt a kind of indefinite dependence. He did not feel free towards that which came to him from outer Nature. And when he rose to a spiritual world, he was less than ever able to feel freedom. For in the first place he was dependent on the Guru in regard to the method of his development. By allowing himself to be influenced by the Guru in an intensive way, so that he might experience the soul-spiritual independently of the body, he felt more than ever dependent on those spiritual worlds into which he had entered through knowledge. In those worlds he felt, as it were, that he was an instrument of the divine-spiritual powers. In every single thought, in every shade of feeling, he felt dependent on the divine-spiritual streams coming from the spiritual worlds which he had learned to know and which pulsed through his own organism.

Humanity was able to attain ego-consciousness and the consciousness of freedom just because those ancient conditions ceased, and because for a certain space of time man set the highest value on basing himself exclusively upon the knowledge obtained through the medium of his body.

What the body transmits, only gives us thought-pictures, which merely reproduce for the external world that which reveals itself in Nature.

In the early nineties of the last century, I showed in my "PHILOSOPHY OF SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY" the attitude towards the moral world of one who is quite filled with the modern natural-scientific

mentality. Little by little one discovers that natural science can apply all its thinking activity, even to a greater extent than it has actually done, to the external phenomena, entering into them purely in thoughts, and thus reaching laws which may be grasped in thoughts. One comes to the point of saying: This scientific conception of Nature cannot of its own self reach supersensible spheres; any inner soul-experience which is accessible to it is merely the picture of a physical world outside, and must remain so.

But if we develop our thinking to that perfect stage reached by the natural-scientific age, if we stand within the strict exact methods of modern research, not as amateurs or uninitiated persons, but with a scientific mentality penetrating into the inner connections, then we shall gradually reach an inner experience of thinking which is now no longer dependent on anything physical or corporeal.

As a rule, this is somewhat difficult to grasp for modern men. But just those who have dived down deeply into modern natural science, will finally discover in their life of thought something which is not transmitted by the body. In my "PHILOSOPHY OF SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY", written in the early nineties of the last century, I called this life of thought "pure thought" and its activity "pure thinking".

I have tried to show that when we grasp an amoral Nature, a Nature which contains nothing moral, towards which we can find no religious connection, when we grasp such a Nature with thoughts that have been purged of all inner instincts, of every inner impulse, of all inner fantasy, and if we have grown strong in these thoughts on Nature, that then something penetrates out of our inner being into these purified scientific thoughts, something which constitutes the individual, personal moral impulses of the single human beings.

If we look into Nature in an unbiassed way, and without stopping at this survey at the same time our own personality, we discover that the more scientifically we think and experience these scientific thoughts, the greater will be the power of the moral intuition - this is how I defined it in my book - penetrating into our purified thinking. And then we face the world and say: Undoubtedly, Nature has lost its divine element for us, it is devoid of moral qualities, but as we think of Nature we feel that our purest natural-scientific thoughts are filled by moral intuitions coming from our own inner being and pulsing through them; we feel this. just as we ordinarily feel the blood pulsing in our physical head, so that it may serve as a physical instrument of thought.

Those who have once felt, once experienced this, know through this experience that the spiritual exists, a purely spiritual essence independent of the body. Within this spiritual element which is independent of the body, within the power of that thinking activity which has been given to us by the epochs of Galilei, Copernicus, Goethe and Darwin, and which enables us to grasp Nature in

an entirely natural way, we acquire an inner power enabling us, as modern men, to penetrate into the spiritual essence of the world to which we belong, without having to seek a Guru in the ancient manner. For that deep confidence which passed, as I have described, in an external way from the Chela, the pupil, to the Guru, is substituted for modern men by that which we experience when we allow our gaze to sweep in an exact way, with mathematical exactness, over Nature and then look back upon our own being, asking ourselves earnestly, with a genuine deepening of our feeling: What have you done just now? What lives within you?"

That which was active within us while we were thinking about Nature, with the exclusion of every arbitrary or subjective thought or feeling, that which was weaving in our soul while we were completely immersed in the observation of Nature, in an objective contemplation from which everything subjective has been eliminated, now gives us from within that deep confidence which the pupil of ancient times once felt for his Guru. We attain, I might say, simply through the fact that we stand in the world as human beings, and through the natural-scientific mentality, that deep confidence telling us: "If you have developed a thinking activity excluding anything coming from your fantasy or from arbitrary thoughts and feelings, if you have really unfolded such a thinking activity, which you accept confidently in order to grasp your thoughts with it, then you will surely be able to unfold this kind of thinking."

And we continue unfolding it in the way described in my last lecture, namely through meditation. That is to say, we rise to the power contained in that thinking which a modern man uses for a natural-scientific observation of the world, and are thus able to fill it with the contents described in my book "KNOWLEDGE OF THE HIGHER WORLDS", and in other writings. There you will find, for instance, thought described as meditation within thought. In my last lecture I explained to you what this consists of principally.

In ordinary life, our thoughts hurriedly glide over the objects and processes which we perceive in the world; they glide over them passively, as it were, and we allow them to follow the direction dictated by the impressions which we receive from outside. At the most, we may reflect over what we have thus obtained through these external impressions. But now we arrest these thoughts, so to speak, through meditation. We might also say that we now leave aside every impression which comes to us from the external world; we abstract ourselves from these impressions. Yet these external impressions have taught us to think. We learned to unfold the power which lies in thought. Now we no longer hold fast sense-impressions, but only this inner power of thinking, and into it we pour ideas and thoughts which can easily be surveyed, and rest within these thoughts.

(TO BE CONTINUED)